



# AIDS—A Global Perspective

**I**t is amazing, and humbling, to realize that in the late 1970s, the worldwide epidemic of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection was silently underway and unnoticed. By the time its clinical manifestations were first recognized in the United States in 1981, the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was already occurring on several continents. The worldwide scope of HIV infection and AIDS was not fully realized until 1986-1987; as of November 1, 1987, more than 62,000 AIDS cases were reported to the World Health Organization from 127 countries.

Yet, despite the delay in recognizing HIV and AIDS, the global mobilization to confront the HIV pandemic is well underway—and in record time. After several years, the World Health Organization (WHO) started to collect AIDS case reports and organize other exchanges of technical and policy information. The Special Programme on AIDS, officially created on February 1, 1987, has been entrusted with the responsibility to direct and coordinate the global strategy against AIDS—to lead the global fight. The Special Programme has designed the Global AIDS Plan, has mobilized sufficient resources to begin its implementation (which already involves more than 90 countries throughout the world) and has marshalled the support of every nation in the world.

In October 1987, the United Nations General Assembly, in discussing AIDS, approved a resolution calling for international cooperation in combatting this global threat to health. The General Assembly's actions are historic in two ways. First, AIDS can no longer be considered strictly a local, national or regional concern. Nor can it be thought to be a health problem for isolated or limited segments of society. In a resolute and clear fashion, the truly global scope and implications of AIDS have been stated.

The second historic feature of the General Assembly's debate was the explicit recognition that AIDS is not strictly a medical or health problem; rather, it has economic, social, cultural and political dimensions. Of course, this is not unique to AIDS, as the broad impact of disease on individuals, societies and history is well documented. Yet, as in so many other ways, AIDS has forced us to reexamine or reconsider vital and often unresolved issues.

In this special issue of *THE WESTERN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE*, we have sought to introduce American readers to some of the international dimensions of the HIV pandemic. Of particular interest will be descriptions of national AIDS programs in France, Uganda, the Philippines and Japan. Each of these countries has many experiences useful for the consideration of domestic AIDS issues.

To what extent can we learn from the experiences of others? To what extent can we learn from our own past experiences? These are central questions as we seek to develop strategies and policies for AIDS prevention and control.

Many have compared the global AIDS-control program to the successful smallpox-eradication program led by WHO. While global smallpox eradication exemplified the capacity for coordinated international health interventions, many differences between smallpox and AIDS are immediately apparent. Beyond the questions of vaccine, the clinical manifestations of infection and the basic epidemiology, we must recognize that smallpox had already been eradicated from the industrialized world when the WHO program started. In dramatic contrast, AIDS affects the industrialized world as severely as the developing world.

At WHO, we believe that research and efforts to prevent and control AIDS are firmly and irrevocably international and that we must learn from each other's national efforts how best to control AIDS.

Thus, in the world of the late 1980s, in which AIDS-related events in Uganda are reported promptly in the United States, and research findings in Australia become immediately relevant to policy discussion in Europe, we are witnessing a specific demonstration of the general principle that we are on a single "spaceship Earth." In the need for international cooperation, sharing and assistance prompted by the HIV pandemic, is there a message for us all?

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